Use of Ionising Radiation by Professional Football Clubs to Assess Asymptomatic Transfer Candidates

Maj D Bailey

FRCR, RAMC*

Consultant Radiologist

Dr E McNally

MRCPI, FRCR

Consultant Radiologist

Department of Radiology, Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre, Windmill Road, Oxford, UK

SUMMARY: The financial considerations of transfer candidates in the football league is such that a detailed medical examination as well as other investigations are required prior to a successful transfer. With this in mind the concern is raised that professional footballers may be exposed to excessive ionising radiation by undergoing unnecessary radiological imaging. Our study was conducted in order to assess the use of plain films in the assessment of transfer candidates in the premier league.

Introduction

Ionising radiation regulations(1) require that medical exposures be clinically justified. The Royal College of Radiologists have issued a guideline(2) discouraging the use of ionising radiation in the assessment of asymptomatic transfer candidates. We carried out an audit of current practice to determine whether or not these guidelines had been accepted by professional football clubs. A questionnaire was sent to all 22 Premier League clubs, of which 14 responded.

Materials

A questionnaire was sent to the Chief Physiotherapist of all Premier League Clubs. Questions were posed on a number of clinical situations, including imaging requirements of asymptomatic footballers who were potential transfer candidates. Part of this questionnaire reproduced in Figure 1. This was the most important component of the study as the category of transfer candidate it represents is one without significant symptoms. Replies were anonymous.

Anatomical site of symptoms but no pain	Radiological Investigations							If other please specify
	Plain Films	MRI	CT	U/S	Nuclear medicine	None	Other	
Knee	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	-----
Hip	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	-----
Lumbar Spine	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	-----
Thoracic Spine	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	-----
Cervical Spine	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	-----
Ankle	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	-----
Shoulder	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	-----

Fig 1. A potential transfer candidate has no symptoms

Which screening tests would you undertake? (please tick the boxes of your choice)

*now Consultant Radiologist, Department of Radiology, Royal Hospital Haslar, Gosport, Hants PO12 2AA

Results

Fourteen (64%) of clubs responded. (Because of the anonymity of the replies we were unable to resurvey non-responders). Nine (64%) indicated that asymptomatic transfer candidates would require some form of imaging and 8(58%) of these would order plain films. Five (36%) would request both plain films and MRI with only 1(7%) requiring MRI alone without plain radiographs.

Discussion

Most professional Football League club physiotherapists are in a position to order, via the club's doctor, plain films of their patients.

Because of the major financial implications surrounding transfer candidates at the highest levels of the professional Football League, concerns regarding occult musculoskeletal pathology are understandable. These concerns have, in the past, resulted in many footballers undergoing radiological examinations in the absence of any clinical indication. In view of the ionising radiation

regulations, the College has issued a guideline to Radiologists, recommending against this practice.

Our audit shows that two-thirds of clubs will use plain films to assess asymptomatic players. The use of MRI appears to be becoming more prevalent, but currently is only requested by 5(36%) clubs. Greater liaison between radiologists offering an imaging service to football clubs, and the clubs sports medicine specialists is recommended to reduce ionising radiation exposure by encouraging the use of MRI.

REFERENCES

1. Ionising Radiation (Protection of Persons undergoing Medical Examination or Treatment-POPUMET) Regulations 1988. HMSO.
2. Professional footballers. Repeated radiographs on transfer from one club to another. S Field, Faculty of Clinical Radiology. Guide lines to all Members and Fellows of the Royal College of Radiologists, 7th May 1992 (Letter).

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